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SUBJECT: Algeria: Bendjedid Versus the Hardliners

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8 September 1986

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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

8 September 1986

Algeria: Bendjedid Versus the Hardliners

Summary

Radicals within the Algerian Government are beginning to challenge President Chadli Bendjedid. Falling oil prices, the US-Libyan crisis [redacted] have given his opponents opportunities to try to undermine the President's domestic and foreign policies. The old-line radicals are particularly unhappy about Bendjedid's program to move the country closer to the West and away from adherence to a Soviet-style economic system. Bendjedid is not in serious danger of being ousted, but he almost certainly will be compelled to pay greater attention to the demands of his opponents. As a result, we anticipate [redacted] more cautious policies at home and abroad, greater Soviet meddling, and additional difficulties in US-Algerian relations. [redacted]

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After coming to power in 1979, President Bendjedid has gradually removed those in the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) and the government who were closely tied to former President Boumedienne. Many of these individuals were fighters from the revolutionary period who lacked the skills necessary to run a complex government apparatus. Unlike his predecessors, Bendjedid is little moved by ideological dogma or revolutionary fervor. His political priorities are more pragmatic, focusing on national and Maghreb concerns, such as agricultural and gas production, and the Western Sahara problem. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Maghreb Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 4 September 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [redacted]

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[redacted]

The President's successful initiative last year to modify the National Charter--a document that outlines the country's ideology and objectives--was the capstone of his efforts to redefine the country's political orientation. The Charter, approved in a national referendum last January, deemphasizes socialism and places greater stress on private enterprise and governmental decentralization. To implement this program, the President has tried to move new faces into positions of authority. [redacted]

The Hardliners Fight Back

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In our view, however, Bendjedid's initiatives are losing momentum. Embassy [redacted] reporting this year indicates that leftist ideologues, led by FLN Permanent Secretary Messaadia, are fighting back. Messaadia and his followers, for example, are trying to get their militant message across by gaining control of the official media. Those opposed to the President consider their actions as one of the last opportunities to preserve the socialist heritage of the Algerian revolution. [redacted]

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We believe the best evidence of the radical challenge is Algeria's improved ties with Tripoli, growing cooperation with Libya and Iran within OPEC, the slow pace of Algerian-US ties, and the government's desultory record in making economic decisions. In our view, the factionalism reflects ideological division primarily, but other motives, such as bureaucratic maneuvering and personal rivalry, also are at play. [redacted]

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[redacted] there are sharp differences between the Bendjedid and Messaadia camps on topics such as relations with Libya, Iran, the USSR, as well as with the US. In addition, they are at odds on the Western Sahara dispute. The hardliners believe the government should fully support the Islamic revolution in Iran. On Libya, Messaadia's supporters want Algiers to offer Qadhafi military assistance to demonstrate solidarity with Tripoli against US pressure. They also perceive that Bendjedid's policies have moved the country too close to Washington, and that this works to the detriment of Algeria's strategic relations with the USSR. Finally, Messaadia's group wants the government to take more direct action -- specifically terrorism by the Algerian-backed Polisario inside Morocco -- to counter Morocco's military success in the Western Sahara. [redacted]

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Developments this year have helped the hardliners in their efforts to undermine the President's policies. The rapid fall of petroleum prices and the need for austerity will slow the pace of domestic reform. [redacted] Messaadia views the economic situation as an opportunity to undermine Western economic interests in Algeria. Moreover, Bendjedid's illness [redacted]

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created a sense of unease and drift, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Bendjedid's supporters were particularly concerned about the President's failure to take decisive action in dealing with economic problems. [REDACTED]

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Outlook and Implications for the US

At this stage, none of these challenges, in our judgment, represent a serious threat to Bendjedid. He remains first among equals in Algeria's consensus-style government and still maintains the support of most of the military. Nevertheless, the President almost certainly has lost some standing among peers. For example, Bendjedid was widely expected to announce significant personnel changes in the FLN at its recent Central Committee meeting, but no changes were made. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the hardliners successfully resisted Bendjedid's efforts, producing a stalemate between the two sides.

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We expect Bendjedid to act cautiously and to try to placate his opponents. He will have increasing difficulty imposing his agenda for political and economic reform on the FLN. Nevertheless, during the rest of the year we do not foresee the political opposition gaining the military support necessary to challenge the President. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets will almost certainly try to influence developments. Algerian-Soviet relations have deteriorated under Bendjedid, and Moscow would like to reverse his turn toward the West. They almost certainly view Bendjedid's current problems as an opportunity to strengthen his opposition, but probably will move cautiously to avoid souring ties with him. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

In our view, continued political infighting will create difficulties in US-Algerian relations.¹ Bendjedid probably would not push for more contacts in order not to placate the hardliners. The Algerians believe the United States is not encouraging bilateral trade in natural gas, modifying its pro-Moroccan policy--particularly on the Western Sahara dispute--or allowing Algiers to purchase sophisticated military aircraft. We doubt that Algiers is prepared to develop closer bilateral ties at this juncture, in any case, without what it perceives as a significant gesture from Washington on military aid. Algerian leaders want sophisticated weapons from the United States, but they probably will be unwilling to make the political concessions, such as completely breaking with Libya, to obtain them. [REDACTED]

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